

BACKGROUND AND PATTERNS OF O. HENRY'S TEXAS BADMAN STORIES*

PROTOTYPES of the characters of O. Henry's Texas *badman* stories can be found among men who lived at the time about which the author writes. These creatures of fancy, more moderate in action than their counterparts in the flesh, he projects within a region of definite bounds, making ample use of background material to add reality to character and incident.

The area that furnishes the settings for the *badman* stories is made up chiefly of the *brasada* or chaparral region along the Rio Grande. In the 70's and 80's this space stretched from King Fisher's Pendencia Creek ranch near Eagle Pass to the Laguna Madre near Brownsville. It embraced what was then known as the Nueces Strip and was bounded on the south by the Bravo del Norte and the strip of no-man's land called the Zona Libre.¹ To the northeast it extended to the Sutton-Taylor feud grounds in and about Cuero; and its northern terminus was the Alamo Plaza at Santone. For the most part it was then, as indeed it is now, a semi-arid tableland, of fertile sandy loam, with immense flats of curly mesquite grass and prickly pear.

In *The Caballero's Way* O. Henry calls a pear flat the devil's pincushion, and says that a ride through such a place is more weird and lonesome than the journey of an Amazonian explorer. He further observes of this species of cactus:

This demon plant warps itself a thousand times about what look to be open and inviting paths, only to lure the rider into blind and impassable spine-defended *bottoms of the bag*, leaving him to retreat, if he can, with the points of the compass whirling in his head.²

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While these observations are perhaps expressive of the natural feelings of an observer of a cactus jungle, to the Cisco Kid the demon plant with its blind lures offers no problems; his red roan mount lessens the distance to Tonia Perez's jacal with every step he takes through the countless acres of the prickly *nopal*.

City bred Chicken Ruggles, the Piggy and Black Eagle of the story,³ steps tremulously along the mat of curly mesquite grass, for he is afraid of snakes, brigands, centipedes, mirages, and fandangoes; but man of the world, Black Bill, takes the rugged landscape "in his stride." To him the country looks like a gentleman's private estate, except that there are no bulldogs to run out and bite him. He observes merely that the grass is shoe-top deep, and that the mesquite trees look like a peach orchard—and that Ogden's ranch shack is about the size of an elevated railroad station.⁴

Along the sloughs and water courses live oak, pecan, and hackberry trees grow thickly. Great expanses of the grassy prairies have been covered over completely by spinous thickets of brush, as impenetrable and forbidding as the bristling pear. These are the *chaparral*, or *brasada*, made up mainly of catclaw, mesquite, black brush, and juajilla, all hardy perennials of the Leguminosae family, plants which seem to disdain soil and water and derive their sustenance from the air.

Besides the Rio Grande, or Bravo del Norte, this great tableland is drained by the rivers Frio and Nueces, and the infinity of waterless creeks, or *arroyos*, draws, and *cañadas* that serve as tributaries to the main streams. It is a peculiarity of the prairie rivers of Texas, noted even by early travelers,⁵ that for long distances of their courses they are in reality a succession of pools or holes of water, joined only in

the rainy seasons by a continuous surface flow. It was this odd nature of the west Texas streams that prompted a wag-gish tourist of early days to comment that "the rivers of this region are not navigable—at least not above ground."⁶

Tonia Perez, in *The Caballero's Way*, who lives at the edge of the pear, a hundred yards down Arroyo Hondo from Lone Wolf Crossing on the Frio, fills her earthenware jar from a water hole in that stream. Chicken Ruggles finds Bud King's band of stock rustlers at a water hole on the San Miguel;⁷ Lieutenant Sandridge camps at a water hole on the Frio while engaged in the delicate business of ensnaring the Cisco Kid.⁸ In fact, the water hole before the windmill came had a value which a present day observer can hardly appreciate.

Young Willie Porter came to La Salle county in 1882. He could not have picked a more favorable time—or a better place—to gain acquaintance with material for his desperado stories.

The International & Great Northern, the first railroad to enter the chaparral, had pushed through from San Antonio to Laredo the year before. The newly invented barbed wire had made its appearance some years earlier,⁹ and big ranchers and free grass men were in the midst of a great contest over the fencing of the landed domain. Armed bands of fence-cutters played havoc with barbed wire in the three counties between Cotulla and San Antonio. Editorials about fence-cutting depredations filled the papers. In Bexar county there were three bands of cutters called the *Knights of the Nippers*, the *Order of Javelinas*, the *Blue Devils*. In one night alone five-hundred yards of fence were cut within ten miles of San Antonio.¹⁰ The expression, "Keep your fences up," variants of which are encountered often in O. Henry's stories, was a widely current locution of the time. Barbed wire and

the railroad, two of the three factors which were to revolutionize the cattle industry of Texas, had appeared in the chaparral; the third, the windmill, was yet to play its full part.

At this time (1882), Indiana-born Sam Bass, train-robber and hero of cattle-trail and ballad, had met his fate a few years before at Round Rock; Texas' own and greatest "single-handed terror" of all time, John Wesley Hardin, had done five of his seventeen years at Huntsville; King Fisher, riddle of the Rio Grande, now reformed and a deputy sheriff of Uvalde County, had served two peaceful years as an upholder of the law. Ben Thompson, as marshal of Austin, was, for the time, in a quieter, legal phase of his turbulent career. Chivalrous Ham White, stage and train robber, the Claude Duval of the age, had concluded the Texas chapter of a career that had several more years to run. Ranger Lee "Red" Hall, who had had a hand in checking the lawlessness of all these bandits, had now married, quit the ranger force, and settled down to the more lucrative business of managing the 400,000 acre Dull, Hall and Dull ranch in the Nueces and Frio sectors. Hall had been induced to take up the task of tangling with the fence-cutters because his wife, with many bandits still at large, feared for his safety as a ranger.¹¹

Willie Porter came as a visitor to the D. H. & D. ranch, and made his home with Lee's brother Dick, a sheepman, who ran his herds on this immense domain. Dick's house was not much bigger than an elevated railroad station, and probably looked very much like the shack Black Bill found Henry Ogden living in.

From Lee Hall and his ex-ranger cowboys young Porter could have learned much of the bandit lore that was to enrich his Texas stories. He could have heard tales of nineteen-

year old Lieutenant Wright,¹² fearless and carefree in combat, much like the debonair youth in McNulty's company, who is the envy of Bob Buckley;¹³ he could have learned of Philadelphia born N. A. Jennings, a *dead ringer* for "the misguided Eastern man, burdened with an education," who speaks of Tybalt and his book of arithmetic;¹⁴ of "Girlie" McKinney, a study for Captain Kinney whom Bud King hides from;¹⁵ and of Captain Leander H. McNelly (O. Henry's McNulty), ranger chieftan who broke up old Juan Cortinas' cattle stealing on the border.

The best known outlaw of the Nueces Strip in those days was J. King Fisher. It was through fear of Fisher mainly that Captain Hall's wife had persuaded the ranger chieftan to leave the service. There is indication in two of O. Henry's stories that the former sojourner at the D. H. & D. ranch was familiar with the whims of the handsome, swashbuckling "enigma of the border." Fisher it was whom tradition says Horace Greeley chided for his reputed wantonness in the use of firearms. Greeley, a report says, met Fisher while on a visit to San Antonio. Of Fisher, too, it is said that the road leading to his Pendencia ranch had at its entrance this warning sign: "This Is King Fisher's Road. Take the Other."¹⁶ The implication was, of course, that misfortune would betide the thoughtless traveller who failed to exercise the caution the words demanded. Tradition also has it that Fisher once in a capricious mood had his men hold up a circus train just to get him a tiger skin for a pair of chaparreras.

In *The Last of the Troubadours*, O. Henry could have had King Fisher in mind when he drew his portrait of King James. King James appears as a vain autocrat of the range, and the biggest cattleman between the Alamo Plaza in San Antonio and Bill Hopper's saloon in Brownsville. "Also he was

the loudest and most offensive bully and braggart and badman in Southwest Texas. And he always made good whenever he bragged." (Fisher was said to keep a record of both those whom he had killed and those whom he intended to kill.)

Sixty-five-year old, ninety-eight pound sheepman Sam Ellison is overawed on meeting this formidable two-hundred-pound monarch, of sunburned visage and fierce eyes, with sixshooters and millions of cartridges, and a shotgun laid across his saddle.

O. Henry has sometimes been accused of the American failing of hyperbole; but King James is hardly more of an exaggeration of a living creature than the King Fisher pictured to us by former McNelly ranger, Philadelphia journalist and adventurer, Napoleon Augustus Jennings. Jennings recorded his experiences as a ranger in his book, *A Texas Ranger*, published in 1899. In an account of the capture of Fisher, Jennings thus describes the man:

He was about twenty-five years old at that time, and the most perfect specimen of a frontier dandy and desperado I ever met. He was tall, beautifully, and exceeding handsome. He wore the finest clothing procurable, but all of the picturesque, border, dime-novel kind. His broad-brimmed white Mexican sombrero was profusely ornamented with gold and silver lace and had a golden snake for a band. His fine buckskin Mexican short jacket was heavily embroidered with gold. His shirt was of the finest and thinnest linen and was worn open at the throat, with a silk handkerchief knotted loosely about the wide collar. A brilliant crimson silk sash was wound about his waist, and his legs were hidden by a wonderful pair of chaparejos, or chaps . . . made of the skin of a royal Bengal tiger. . . . Hanging from his cartridge belt were two ivory-handled, silver plated six-shooters.¹²

O. Henry makes his terrible King James a badman, and the biggest cattleman of his part of the state, a cattle king, in

contradistinction to sheepman Sam Ellison, the last of the barons.

Cattle king and badman should not be regarded as an anomalous combination. Elsewhere (*Seats of the Haughty*) the author defines the term *cattle king*:

In them days, as you know, there was cattle barons and cattle kings. The difference was this: when a cattleman went to Santone and bought beer for the newspaper reporters and only give them the number of cattle he actually owned, they wrote him up for a baron. When he bought 'em champagne wine and added in the amount of the cattle he had stole, they called him a king.

Outlaw King Fisher's method of acquiring "wet" stock from Mexico was hardly less orthodox than the behavior of some of the *kings*. Fisher may have reasoned that if Cortinas could rustle cows on this side of the Rio Bravo, it was at least morally within the law for a Texian to cross over and rustle on the other side.

King James (to return now to the story), after telling old man Ellison that he has bought the two sections of land on which the man's lease had lately expired, further says to his bewildered victim:

This range you've got your sheep on is mine. I'm putting up a wire fence, forty by sixty miles; and if there's a sheep inside of it when it's done, it'll be a dead one. If they ain't gone by then, I'll send six men over here with Winchesters to make mutton out of the whole lot.¹⁷

The reader wonders whether these are the words of cattle king or badman, and whether O. Henry had a purpose in portraying King James as having qualities of both. Sheepman Sam Ellison is definitely the victim of the barbed wire entanglements that played havoc with small stockmen in that era. One of the duties of Lee Hall, on taking over the management of the Dull Brothers' holdings, was to acquire the

right and title to small tracts joining one another. By April, 1883, Messrs. Dull, Hall and Dull had run their fences round 400,000 acres.¹⁸

King James embodies all the evil of the syndicate owner and the badman of the stripe of Fisher—although in the story there is no specific point made of the pure desperado aspect of the man—unless it be the demonstration of goodness James makes when he finds that Sam Ellison is kin to the Jackson County Reeves of Mississippi, his native state.

“Now let’s re-talk over some things we discussed a few days ago,” says the mollified King James when we see him for a second time in conversation with the baron. “They call me a bad man; and they’re only half right. There’s plenty of room in *my* pasture for your bunch of sheep and their increase for a long time to come.”

King James, however, is too late softening in his attitude towards Ellison. The old man has made the fateful error of confiding his sad plight to troubadour Galloway, and Galloway, as a courteous guest, feels obliged to help his host out of his *difficulty* by “regulating the King’s account.”

The real desperado, King Fisher, suffered a fate similar to that of King James. After joining the church at a Baptist camp meeting, he had a change of heart and soon became deputy sheriff of Uvalde county.¹⁹ He was such a popular peace officer that it was generally conceded he would be the next sheriff; but before the election took place, he was murdered in San Antonio while serving as mediator in a difficulty between gamblers Joe Foster and Ben Thompson.

Other traits of the legendary Fisher are represented in the person of Bud King, in *The Passing of Black Eagle*. King is here shown, as Fisher was said to be, as an affable man of modest desires, who always keeps a sharp lookout for the

rangers, and is not above exacting stores from supply sources along his ways. King's band is depicted as a fun-loving, peaceable, unpicturesquely clad group, of gentle manners and soft voices, who could easily be mistaken for a bunch of country bumpkins out for a fish-fry or pecan-gathering. They run off some very good companies of horses from the ranges, drive a few bunches of cattle across the Rio Grande, and dispose of them profitably on the *otro lado*; and they terrorize Mexican villages and settlements for provisions and ammunition. They escape law officers on both sides of the river without killing any of them, and are content with reasonable profits from their transactions.

When news comes that Captain Kinney (a name suggestive of ranger Captain McKinney) and his men are coming to investigate their actions, the prudent Bud orders the gang to retire for a time to the prickly fastnesses of the Frio bottoms, where they go into camp by a water hole.

The illicit cattle deals, the horse transactions, the terrorizing of the villages and settlements for provisions, and retirement to a place of hiding when the rangers are in "hot pursuit" are all echoes of routine incidents in the career of Fisher.

And the thumbnail sketch of the genial Bud, idol of his peaceable, fun-loving companions, is in tenor not unlike accounts left us of the resourceful border chieftain.

N. A. Jennings records an incident that illustrates Fisher's affability. Once while on a scout for desperadoes, says Jennings, he and ranger Bill McKinney went into a saloon in Eagle Pass. They had not been in the place long before the noted King Fisher himself walked in.

"Whoopee!" cried the king. "All the rangers have gone down the river. Everybody come up to the bar and have a drink!"

McKinney and Jennings walked up and placed themselves on each side of Fisher.

"Well, gosh darn my chaps," said the outlaw, recognizing them. "I thought you boys were all down the river. . . . Do you want me for anything?"

When told that they did, Fisher handed over his white-handled six-shooters, and after drinking with the rangers, went to their camp, and that night accompanied some of them to a fandango.

Fisher, on this occasion, as usual, gave bail and was released.²⁰

While Lee Hall was in Austin in January, 1877, making plans to take over the command of the ailing L. H. McNelly, he was ordered to hurry from the city to the scene of a daylight stage robbery that had taken place on the Camino Real between Austin and San Antonio.²¹ When Hall caught the robbers in Luling they proved to be one Ham White and a young man whom White in a thoughtless moment had employed in the only recorded instance of his detaining a stage-coach with a helper.

On confessing, White established himself as the highwayman who had been looting stages in and out of Austin for several years. For color, daring, and gallantry, White has been likened to Claude Duval, notorious English knight of the road, whose death was the subject of a satiric ode by Samuel Butler.

White was a robber with a definite code of ethics. Unlike Duval, who was modest in his demands of his female victims, the Texas highwayman refrained from molesting women altogether. As far as his observation would enable him to estimate the status of his victims, he took from them only according to their ability to pay.

Except in the one careless instance that proved his un-

doing, he worked alone. He would sit his horse while a robbery was in progress, urging passengers or coachman, with a wave of his pistol, to hand over their valuables or rip open the mail bags. When a driver once protested the command to slash a mail pouch, saying he had taken an oath to protect the U.S. Mails, White patted his revolver, and declared: "This is the oath you're to obey." He was considerate enough, however, to make those who rifled the sacks at his bidding to keep the contents of each separate, avowing that he did not want to put the government to any unnecessary inconvenience.

Many are the stories told of White's warped notions of generosity. Once one of his victims was a young man from Tennessee, from whom White took a thousand dollars that the man declared he had been saving for years to go into the grocery business. On hearing the tale, the bandit hastily returned \$200, and promised to send more later, saying that industry deserved a reward. On an occasion when White relieved a clergyman of his watch, that gentleman asked the highwayman if he would rob a minister of the gospel of a cherished gift.

"I don't know," White is reported to have answered, as he hesitated. "What church do you belong to?"

The minister stated his church.

White emitted a befitting oath, and said: "Here. Take your watch back. I belong to that church myself."

During the robbery that led to his capture, White, at the outset, had taken \$54 and a watch from Corbin, the driver. After picking up \$900 from the passengers and \$500 in a registered letter, he returned Corbin his watch, explaining that since he had done so well, "You can have your watch back."

White was tried and sentenced to 99 years in a military

prison for robbing the U.S. mails. A near relative of Secretary of the Navy Goff, he was pardoned by President Hayes—the granting of the pardon being the last act of Hayes' official life.²²

Later White robbed stages and trains in Colorado under the name of Burton.²³ He was again caught, sentenced to life imprisonment, but escaped, and, when last heard of, was robbing stages in California, always alone, and often identified with Black Bart,²⁴ a notorious highwayman of the period.

Mr. Ham White is thus depicted as a ubiquitous road-agent of rare intelligence and valuable connections, of solitary habits and quaint humor, with an uncanny knack for working himself out of ticklish situations.

O. Henry's Ham, called Black Bill, in *The Hiding of Black Bill*, has habits and manners that suggest a close kinship with Ham White.

As the "strong, red-faced man with a Wellington beak and small, fiery eyes tempered by flaxen lashes" sits on the railroad station platform at Los Pinos, he is thus addressed by his fat, seedy companion:

"Ain't seen you in about four years, Ham. Which way you been travelling?"

Ham then tells of his flight to the thorny fastnesses of the Nueces country in Texas after robbing an M.K.&T. train, revealing at the end of his account that he is Black Bill.

The Ham of the story "hides out," under the very appropriate brush country name of Percival St. Clair, on the sheep ranch of one Henry Ogden. Ham takes the job of tending Ogden's flocks, but soon the wool enters his soul and Nature gets next to him. Ogden one evening, trying to mitigate the loneliness of his herder, brings out a deck of cards, and the two play casino, stimulating their spirits by partaking occa-

sionally from a decanter of bourbon the rancher has fetched from a cupboard.

"Do you remember reading in the papers about a month ago," says Ogden, "about a train hold-up on the M.K. & T.? The express agent was shot through the shoulder and about \$15,000 in currency taken. And it is said that only one man did the job."

"Was there any description mentioned of this single-handed terror?" asks Ham.

"Why, no," says Ogden; "because they say nobody got a good sight of him because he wore a mask. But they know it was a train robber called Black Bill, because he always works alone, and because he dropped a handkerchief in the express car that had his name on it."²⁵

The two then engage in a quantity of non-committal conversation that leaves the reader wondering if Ogden is not Black Bill.

Ham, or Black Bill, has a facetious vein, too, that marks him as a robber of the same order as Ham White and Black Bart. To quote the character again:

Mr. Ogden, you and me have got to get sociable. Sheep are all very well to dot the landscape and furnish eight-dollar cotton suitings for man, but for table talk and fireside companions they rank along with five o'clock teasers. If you've got a deck of cards, or a parcheesi outfit, or a game of authors, get 'em out, and let's get on a mental basis. I've got to do something in an intellectual line, if it's only to knock somebody's brains out.²⁶

Ham White, in a less ingenious way, would also express his humor: "Don't you know it's wicked to rob the U.S. mail?" he teased a victim who slit open the mail sacks at the point of his revolver. "I'd make a complaint against you if I had time to fool around the courts as a witness."²⁷

The fictional Ham possesses, too, in common with the real Ham (and surprisingly for a practicing outlaw of either fact or fancy), the very natural trait of fear.

Five armed men have ridden up to the ranch house, and confronting Black Bill, the boss "swings his gun over till the opening in it seems to cover his whole front elevation." The boss states his reason for coming and then asks Black Bill his name.

"Captain," says the flustered Black Bill, "Percival St. Clair is my occupation, and my name is sheep-herder. I've got my flock of veals—no muttons—penned here to-night. The searchers are coming to-morrow to give them a haircut. . . ."

Captain Lee Hall and his three ranger companions surrounded White as he hurriedly and uneasily tightened the cinches of his saddle in a passage-way of a livery stable. Hall walked up closer and addressed the nervous man casually.

"Don't come near me," warned White.

"Why, you look scared," said Hall.

"It's enough to scare anybody to be surrounded by three or four men," the highwayman replied.

Hall and his men then closed in on White pretty much as the posse does on Ogden when they throw him down and take the tell-tale Espinosa City bank bills from his pocket. Hall finds \$4000 and incriminating memoranda in White's pockets.²⁸

There is much in the method Calliope Catesby uses for relief when affected with the megrims that leads one to believe this hypochondriac of the musical pistols owes his genesis to Ben Thompson, the impetuous, unpredictable, and uncurbed city marshal and gambler of Austin. O. Henry's creation is a more genteel chap than Ben, his ostensible means of livelihood more respectable, his method of warning the citizenry of his armored sallies a bit more primitive, but he has enough in common with "Roaring Ben" to be accounted a close relation.

Buck Walton, friend and legal counsel of Thompson, in his life of the gunman, published in the year of the latter's tragic death with King Fisher in San Antonio, pictures his subject as a loving husband and father, with a deep devotion to his old mother—as long as Ben remained sober.²⁹ When animated by strong spirits, Ben behaved so unaccountably that when again normal he would sometimes apologize to the persons he had offended—if those persons were still alive. Often, when “liquored up,” he would be seized with the urge of repentance and reform.²⁷

Walton relates that once when feeling that he was corrupting the youth of Austin, Ben shot up his own gambling parlor.³⁰ This untoward act was performed greatly to the consternation of his “pardner,” one Loraine, who was in despair on seeing bullets from Ben's six-shooters perforating the keno goose, roulette wheels, and faro tables. Prompted by this same urge of reform Ben, one Christmas night, raided the Senate Bar and Variety Theatre, both run by the notorious Wilson, and ended his spree by killing that genial proprietor.³¹ It was a coincidence, of course, that Wilson's place was drawing a large number of Ben's former patrons.

Still keenly sensitive to the problem of social reform, later, while city marshal of Austin, Ben journeyed to San Antonio and killed his old acquaintance, Jack Harris, one-armed ex-scout of Sydney Johnston's in the Mormon War. After losing heavily at Jack's faro table, Ben suddenly realized that the game was crooked. He openly made such a charge, and declared that the joint was a trap of iniquity corrupting the morals of the young men of San Antonio. Harris resented the imputation. An armed encounter followed the next day. Before Harris could wheel his shotgun into action, a bullet from Ben's pistol had laid him low.³²

Thompson was kept in jail for six months pending trial for this killing, much to the anger and disgust of the Austin citizenry. It was a relief to these people when the man was finally tried and acquitted. On his return to Austin with his wife and children, he was met at the train by a host of admirers; they welcomed him with speeches, presented him with flowers, and, removing the horses from the carriage he had entered, pulled the hero up Congress Avenue themselves, a brass band playing a triumphal march as they went along.³³

A notable instance of Ben's "shooting up the town," in Calliope Catesby fashion, occurred after the gunman's defeat in his first attempt at election to the office of town marshal. Downcast at the rejection of his offer of leadership, Thompson, after ample warning of his intentions, buckled on his armor and went forth to play havoc up the Avenue. He shot up the Iron Front saloon (an institution he had sold a few weeks before); took a few pot shots at a former rival drinking establishment; sent a few bullets whizzing into the office of the *Austin Statesman* (an error in judgement, for the *Statesman* was a friendly newspaper); blasted the insides out of an organ-grinder's instrument; sent a few spite tokens into police headquarters; and, his fit of sorrow still upon him, fled from the scene of his chagrin on the Katy Flier—and was not seen again in Austin for two years. When he came back, he again sought the office of marshal, and this time the electorate yielded.³⁴

Thompson's career as a peace-officer ended in his bloody murder with King Fisher at Jack Harris' old variety theater in San Antonio on March 11, 1884. O. Henry arrived in Austin the day after Ben's funeral, and could have read in the *Daily Dispatch* of the "vast concourse of people" who saw the martyr's body consigned to its final resting place.

Calliope Catesby is O. Henry's study of the Thompson style of frontier eccentric. The splenetic Calliope, terror of the village of Quicksand, a place not unlike early Cotulla, announces the start of one of his sorties by the fearful, brassy yell that has caused the townspeople to tack onto him the name of the steam piano. Then he unlimbers his guns to test his aim.

A yellow dog, the personal property of Colonel Swazey, proprietor of the Occidental Hotel, falls feet upward in the dust with one farewell yelp. The new gilt weather-cock on Judge Riley's lemon and ultramarine two-story residence shivers, flaps, and hangs by a splinter. . . . Down the street goes Calliope, shooting right and left. Glass falls like hail; dogs vamoise; chickens fly, squawking; feminine voices shriek concernedly to youngsters at large. The din is perforated at intervals by the staccato of the Terror's guns.³⁵

Buck Patterson and two deputies, less mindful of Catesby's warning than the Austin police were of Ben's admonitory notice, set about at once in making an effort to "gather in the Terror." Their first volley breaks the lock on one of Catesby's guns, explodes a cartridge in his cross belt, and cuts a neat underbit in his right ear. Thompson, according to Walton, once by design, *marked* a San Saba rowdy by drilling a neat hole in his right ear. And just as Ben had finally ended his foray at the railroad station, so does Catesby end his. The Terror gives a final demonstration of his pistol wizardry by barkin' Bud Patterson just as the train arrives. On the train comes Catesby's old mother, who, knowing nothing of her son's rowdy ways, puts the son in an embarrassing situation when she greets him. He saves face by pinning the unconscious marshal's badge on his chest to deceive his unsuspecting mother. On regaining his senses and seeing Catesby's predicament, Patterson joins in the deception and helps keep up the fiction as long as the old lady stays in Quicksand.

There are other particulars, too, in this story of the roarer,

the badman who "treed" the town, that show kinship with instances in the career of the incorrigible Ben. Both Catesby and Thompson profess a deep, perhaps maudlin, attachment to their mothers; Catesby is forty-one years old—his mother tells this to Patterson in the touching scene at the station—the very age of Thompson when he died.³⁶ Catesby, as Thompson often did, shows a kind of remorse; and likewise, as did his prototype in the flesh, attains the marshal's badge.

No other desperado of this tragic era gained a wider reputation as a gunman than the Texas-born author, inventor, one-man-army, and school teacher, John Wesley Hardin. The son of a Methodist preacher and circuit rider, Hardin was in his teens during the carpetbag and scalawag regime; and like many other of his wayward contemporaries may be spoken of as a product of the Reconstruction. The boy was a fiery-tempered individualist, with a somewhat inflated sense of honor and a remarkable ability in the use of firearms.

Ranger N. A. Jennings records that Hardin could take a six-shooter in each hand and put twelve bullets in a playing card with lightning speed at twenty yards.³⁷ Texas trail-drivers avow that at eighteen Wess made Wild Bill Hickok put up his guns when marshal of Abilene, Kansas.³⁸ Wess devised the "road-agent's spin" and invented the shoulder-holster. No man could handle his guns with greater ease than he.

By the time he was seventeen he had killed ten men (mostly carpetbag Governor E. J. Davis's state police), and, as a result, was *on the dodge*. Hidden, befriended, often cornered, and showered with gifts of money by citizens who feared the Negro state police, as rewards for his capture grew, Wess headed for Mexico, went up the trail to Kansas instead, and returned on the run with dead Indians, a Mexi-

can murderer, and a few gamblers and thieves making a bloody wake along his path.

There was nothing mean or little about Wess Hardin. He never stole a horse or cow, or robbed a train, or shot up a town, and wanted only reasonable pay for his expenses the time he chased down and killed the murderer Bideño. He did play cards, and bet on race-horses (of which he owned a few fast ones himself), and traded a good deal in horses and cattle—in a more or less lawful way. He felt that all his killings were justified—every man he killed was trying to kill him—or at least he had a mind to, which in Wess's judgement, was the same thing.

Hardin was so handsome, youthful, and innocent looking that friend and foe alike doubted the tales of his villainy. When at twenty-one, Wess rubbed out his fortieth victim, and an angry mob hanged his brother Joe and cousins Bud and Tom Dixon (perhaps only to show their spite), the outlaw found it expedient to remove to Florida. Four years later he was captured in that state by rangers and brought back to Texas to serve sixteen years for the murder of his last victim.

The Hardin of both fact and legend is sometimes seriously, sometimes playfully, presented "as killing men on slight provocation, and on no provocation at all. He never forgave an injury, and to incur his displeasure was simply suicide."³⁹

The Cisco Kid⁴⁰ of *The Caballero's Way* is an example of the Hardin type of desperado.

He killed for the love of it—because he was quick-tempered—to avoid arrest—for his own amusement—any reason that came to his mind would suffice.

The . . . Kid had killed six men in more or less fair scrimmages, had murdered twice as many . . . , and had winged a larger number whom he modestly forebore to count. Therefore a woman loved him.⁴¹

Hardin calmly tells of his marriage to Jane Bowen shortly after he killed three of a posse who had come from Austin to arrest him:

Nothing of importance happened until I married Jane Bowen, though we were expecting the police to come any time. They would have met with a warm reception in those times, when the marriage bells were ringing around.⁴²

We may wonder whether it was the youthful attractiveness of Hardin—who was of the age given for the Kid—or his “bravery” in the face of trouble that engendered love in his sweetheart.

The Cisco Kid, like Hardin, was a ticklish subject of conversation among his acquaintances—and even among his friends. When ranger Lieutenant Sandridge makes inquiries of the Kid among the Mexicans, they all vehemently deny any knowledge of him. If it had been the Kid’s pastime to kill members of their kind just to see them kick, what would be the penalties he would exact if they angered him, they reasoned.

Storekeeper Fink observes to Sandridge:

No use to ask them Mexicans. They’re afraid to tell. This hombre they call the kid’s been in my store once or twice. I’ve an idea you might run across him—but I guess I don’t care to say myself. I’m two seconds later in pulling a gun than I use to be and the difference is worth thinking about.⁴³

One day in the town of Cuero Wess Hardin is reputed to have bet a friend he could kill with one shot a stranger sitting on a drygoods box two blocks away. The bet was accepted. Hardin fired away, and won his bet, and then serenely walked back into the saloon to take the drink he had won.⁴⁴

Citizens of Cuero were as reluctant as the Mexicans in the story to admit any knowledge of the fearful badman.

“Were they all afraid of him, and had he no friends?”

queried a visitor to Cuero not long after Hardin's days.

"Well, not many friends," the citizen replied. "He had some admirers; but they did not care to say anything, even in his favor, because Wess was too careless. He would hear that a man had been talking about him; and then, without asking what the man had said would fill him full of lead, and afterward ask what lies the scoundrel had been telling about him."⁴⁵

In his autobiography (published the year after his death in 1895) Hardin indicates that it was a favorite practice of his to outwit his captors or would-be captors and escape, almost always after having got revenge. In one notable instance he disguised himself as a wounded Confederate veteran to put an "uppety" freedman in his place—a task he accomplished, miraculously, without bloodshed. Once, too, when found in the presence of a girl by a man who claimed to be her lover, Hardin played the innocent frightened youth he looked like, lured his tormentor out into a stable, and then, to the surprise and chagrin of the fellow, let him have a full dose of lead.⁴⁶

O. Henry successfully combines the disguise and revenge motifs in his story. When the Kid overhears his love, Tonia, plot with ranger Sandridge to entrap him before his visit is over, he could easily have fled at that point, but being a man, like Hardin, who could not overlook an injury, he plans revenge. An adherent of a code that forbids him from personally harming a woman who has done him wrong, the Kid hatches a scheme that satisfies all his requirements. He intercepts the letter Tonia has written to Sandridge and substitutes one of his own, which he pretends has come from her.

"Dear One," he begins. "To escape he says he will dress in my clothes, my red skirt and the blue waist I wear and the brown mantilla over the head and thus ride away. But before that he says that I must put on his clothes, his *pantolones* and *camisa* and hat and ride away on his horse from the *jacal*. . . ."⁴⁷

The Kid sees that the letter reaches the hands of Sandridge and the ranger falls into the trap. The Kid does precisely the opposite of what he says in the letter he will do: he rides away in his own clothes, and the ranger captain, satisfied with the information he has received, pumps five bullets into the escaping figure in female attire—his newly acquired love, Tonia Perez. The Kid rides away unscathed, exulting in his revenge.

This story should not be dismissed without noting another question it poses: could any of the desperadoes practicing their profession in Texas in that era write such a clear, well-ordered letter as the Cisco Kid is represented as doing? Certainly school teacher, author, lawyer John Wesley Hardin could easily put his thoughts on paper. Here are a few lines from a letter he wrote his wife about her brother, Brown Bowen, who was about to hang for a murder the unfortunate creature attributed to John Wesley:

“Jane, dearest, I think as much of your pa and family as ever and blame him for nothing, although I have been badly treated. Dear one, on your account and sister Matt’s I forgive your pa. He and Matt send their love to you and family. Dear one, your pa wanted to know if there was a statement I could make that would save Brown. I told him no, not an honorable, truthful one. . . .”⁴⁸

Hardin, too, had the Kid’s fondness for the *Dear one* formula.

A Chaparral Christmas Gift, another story on the revenge theme, could have been inspired by two unusual incidents in the Sutton-Taylor feud. After Jim Taylor, chief of his faction in this most famous of all Texas feuds, had shot and killed rival feudist Bill Sutton, exclaiming, as he fired, “Here’s something for you!” he thought it wise to hide while the flurry stirred up by his act died down. Nearly a year later,

as the Christmas season approached, Jim evidently concluded that the killing was an old enough event to warrant his moving about again with a fair amount of safety. He and two of his followers, one Hendricks and Winchester Smith, chose the festive season to make a call on one of their friends who lived in a secure, out-of-the-way region in the country. But Jim and his friends had hardly had time to enter into the celebration planned by their host when word was brought to them that some of the Sutton boys were outside with a *surprise* for Jim Taylor. Jim, possibly out of consideration for his host, hastily fled with his two friends from the house into the darkness of a surrounding woodland. None of the three, however, was lucky enough to escape as O. Henry's Madison Lane does with only an underbit in the right ear. One after another they fell, riddled with bullets, as they tried to cross a cotton field.⁴⁹

This case of the deadly exchange of leaden greetings had come to the attention of Lee Hall when sent to Cuero with McNelly. Later, as Captain Hall, he participated in the most unusual occurrence of his eventful career. With seventeen men he raided the home of the bride's father while a wedding party was in progress. It had developed that the bridegroom and six of the guests and next of kin had been indicted for murder. Naturally, the newly married couple were pretty much upset at the rude interruption of the festivities. The husband, whose name was Joe Sitterlee, vowed he would resist the unwarranted intrusion of the law. But when Hall ordered him to send the women out of the house, and prepare for battle, Sitterlee weakened; soon all the men in the party had stacked arms. Then the bride herself appeared with a request.

After all, she said, a girl's marriage did count for something

. . . and wouldn't the lieutenant be kind enough to let the party run its course? Lee Hall laughed and gave his sanction. The band struck up and the dance went on—as merrily as though nothing had occurred.⁵⁰

The idea of lead pellets for gifts—one of them a Christmas token—and the notion of the interrupted wedding celebration, are neatly fused in *A Chaparral Christmas Gift*. In this story Johnny McRoy, rankled by his failure to win Rosita, descends upon the McMullen-Lane wedding feast when it is at its liveliest, and “yells shrilly at the door, with his forty-five in his hand”:

“I'll give you a Christmas present!”

His first shot cuts a neat underbit in Mad Lane's right ear, and his second doubtless would have laid the bride low had not Carson, a sheepman, thrown a plate of venison and frijoles to spoil McRoy's aim. This jealousy-bitten lover, unlike the Cisco Kid, is no respecter of codes. Nor does McRoy, like the Suttons at the Taylor Christmas doings, wait outside for his man—perhaps because the intended victim is the host—and the latter, too, escapes vengeance with only the underbit in his ear. Carson, however, recovering his gun from where the guests had hung their arms, does fall from a McRoy bullet as he pursues the avenger into the darkness.

The cattlemen immediately gather their pistols, sweep out of the house and drive McRoy away. He frolics about for three years with unrestrained lawlessness as the Frio Kid; then he recalls, as another Yule season approaches, the present he has failed to deliver to Mad Lane. He adroitly contrives to be the Santa Claus at the Lane's Christmas doings, devised mainly for the entertainment of the Lane's three-year-old son. In his Santa's garb, McRoy overhears Rosita declare she doesn't think he is wholly bad.

"There's a spot of good somewhere in everybody," she says.

"I heard what you said through the window, Mrs. Lane," says the Frio Kid. "I was just going down in my pocket for a Christmas present for your husband. But I've left one for you, instead. It's in the room to the right."

Of course the Kid means Mad Lane. And after this act of goodness, he suffers a disgraceful death at the hands of a bewildered Mexican sheepherder, who hardly knows what he is about when he fires his *pistola*.

Another story of O. Henry's that embodies a clever adaptation of a dramatic incident of the border sagas is *Jimmy Hayes and Muriel*. Hayes, droll humorist with his pet horned toad, is sent by Captain McLean to join a ranger troop on the eve of a hot engagement with a band of Mexican desperadoes under Sebastiano Saldar. In a running fight, the Mexicans escape across the Rio Grande, leaving the ranger force intact, except for Jimmy Hayes, who cannot be found. The young fellow's disappearance is so mysterious and complete that all are led to believe that he, whose bravery under fire was unknown to them, has fled as a coward from his first engagement. A year later, however, the rangers discover what has happened to their untried comrade. In a big hog-wallow they find the skeletons of three Mexicans, whose decomposed bodies can be recognized only by remnants of their attire. "The largest of the figures had once been Sebastiano Saldar. His great, costly sombrero, heavy with gold ornamentation—a hat famous along the border—lay there pierced by three bullets."

Fifty yards away, in another depression, lies another body, in common ranchman's clothes, with his rifle bearing upon the three. The rangers think the body is that of some cowboy, caught alone, who gave a good account of himself—they

think this until "from underneath the weather-beaten rags of the dead man" there crawls a horned toad. The ranger troop now know: there had been a contest of extermination between the recruit-comrade and the Mexican bravos. They herd close, and a strange requiem follows. They give a wild yell "which is at once a dirge, an apology, and an epitaph, and a paean of triumph."

There are elements in Captain McNelly's Laguna Madre fight that suggest the Hayes-Saldar combat. In the Laguna Madre affair McNelly and his company of seventeen wiped out a band of fifteen Mexican cattle thieves, all bravos of the famous Juan Nepomuceno Cortinas. McNelly himself killed the *jefe* or chieftan, Guadalupe Espiñosa.

N. A. Jennings, who was with McNelly, gives an account of the engagement:

The leader of the raiders, Espiñosa, was thrown from his horse in the fight. McNelly was after him, and as soon as he saw Espiñosa fall he, too, sprang to the ground. Espiñosa jumped into a "hogwallow" in the prairie and McNelly played a trick on the Mexican. The Captain had a carbine and sixshooter. He aimed his carbine carefully at the top of Espiñosa's hogwallow and then fired his pistol in the air. Espiñosa raised his head, and the next instant a bullet from McNelly's carbine had passed through it and the Mexican bandit was dead.⁵¹

In other accounts of this Laguna Madre fight mention is made of "Sonny" Smith's funeral and a costly sombrero taken from one of the Mexicans.⁵²

O. Henry's portrayal of the desperado, then, it may be said in summary, seems less of an exaggeration than nature's representation of his counterpart in the flesh. King Fisher, enigmatical border chieftain, with his tiger-skin chaparreras, and bridle reins strung with human ears, is as unbelievable an errant from the laws of man and of God as the most extrava-

gant invention of the fictionist. Only a writer of tragedy, in the wildest flight of imagination, would give a character such a gory end as Fisher experienced: thirteen bullet holes in head and body—and all put there with no malice aforethought in the minds of his murderers.

If we hesitate to accept the vagaries of the absurd Calliope Catesby, we shall find the marvels of the pistol-wizardry of Ben Thompson just as hard to accept. Without any particularly undue strain on our consciences we can overlook Bud Patterson's joining with Catesby to hide from his mother his evil ways. Calliope will deceive for a worthy cause and wear the marshal's badge only while the old lady remains in Quicksand. Thompson, though, won a permanent star after a series of pyrotechnic displays along trails of blood.

"Well, I'll mark you anyhow," said Thompson, of one of his human targets, who was behind a post with only his right ear protruding.⁵³ And the gunman fired, making a hole in the cartilage as round and as neat as if it had been put there with a stamp. O. Henry, who seems to have been fascinated with this business of puncturing the right ear—he uses it three times—endows the Llano Kid with the credibly human quality of missing his man's ear a sixteenth of an inch, the dire consequences of this human failure constituting the story that follows.⁵⁴

And we feel, too, it is more reasonable to suppose that Henry Ogden will free himself from the "tentacles of the law" by "alibis and other legal technicalities" than to accept the fact that President Hayes freed Ham White from a life sentence, although the man had been found guilty of robbing the U.S. mails. It appears strange that Lieutenant Sandridge, the distraught lover, would throw himself down in the dust beside Tonia, his humming bird, whom he has killed. But lovers of

that era behaved as strangely. Kitty Leroy, a dance hall favorite, disguised herself in male attire to fight a man who had declined to combat a woman. As they joined battle, the man fell from her shot, and she then cried over him, and married him in time to be his widow.⁵⁵

The improbability in the story of the Cisco Kid is that that wily gentleman of nefarious practices is able to dupe so successfully ranger Lieutenant Sandridge—and Mr. Alphonso Smith declares that Hall's presence can be detected in Sandridge. It is certainly unlikely that a victim of such a hoax—as well as of such an unorthodox amour—would have found pleasure in recounting such unsavory details of his career to a fireside circle.

The Kid extricates himself from the trap, too, without firing a shot! No TV or western story enthusiast would tolerate a western where the badman protagonist fails to fire his gun.

It is to be recalled also that O. Henry brings all his badman actors to the stage where he can supply them with the props and scenery he knows so well. The Cisco Kid is on the dodge from a killing he did in the Guadalupe country, but he comes to rest awhile in the grass-roofed *jacal* in a Nueces pear flat and to drink from the red earthen jar filled from a water-hole. Ham, called Black Bill, robs an M.K. & T. train north of San Antonio, but drops off the International to lie low for a spell in the chaparral sheep country. From the remarks he makes one feels that he does not think the country especially attractive—except as a place where he is unlikely to be found—or as good a hiding place as Mexico, a few miles beyond.

Calliope Catesby, embodying many of the idiosyncrasies of Ben Thompson, prefers for his gunplay the narrower sphere of Quicksand—a town pretty much on the order of

Cotulla of those days. A yellow dog and a Mexican's coal-oil bottle are worthy targets for his provincial pistol.

Chicken Ruggles, the spurious Black Eagle, plays for a time with Bud King and his band of cattle and horse rustlers in the *brasada*, but the Chicken is not of their cloth. This canned oyster buccaneer and cheese pirate of colorful speech threatens for a while the supremacy of the desperado chieftain, only to fade on the prospects of his first dose of lead, and make an ignominious exit.

And so do others play their parts in the chaparral. The Llano Kid finds his immediate safety in the Nueces Strip. Here Jimmy Hayes dies a hero in a hog-wallow; here the Frio Kid and King James reveal their streaks of good.

A creature of extravagant fancy, then, may we call this wayward *vaquero* of "red ruin and revenge," precursor of the ridiculous blank-pistol, fisticuff travesty of radio and screen? Let us say, rather, that O. Henry's puppet badman is a truthful reflection of a creature who lived in a lawless and uncertain age.

Of him we may fittingly observe with Bud King: "I never yet see anything on the hoof that he exactly grades up with . . . and he straddles a hoss from where you laid the chunk";⁵⁶ or echo the words of the Nueces Kid: "He ain't had proper trainin'. He never learned how to git skeered. Now, a man ought to be skeered enough when he tackles a fuss to hanker after readin' his name on the list of survivors, anyway."⁵⁷

J. S. GALLEGLY

NOTES

1. In the *Houston Weekly Telegraph*, February 3, 1870, the Zona Libre is defined as a belt of Mexican territory, a few miles wide and one thousand miles long, extending from Bagdad at the

- mouth of the Rio Grande to Chihuahua. Goods were transported duty free in the zone.
2. "The Caballero's Way," *Complete Works of O. Henry* (New York: Garden City, 1937), p. 201.
All references to O. Henry's stories in this lecture are to this edition.
 3. *The Passing of Black Eagle*, p. 427.
 4. *The Hiding of Black Bill*, p. 682.
 5. N. A. Taylor, *Coming Empire, or Two Thousand Miles in Texas on Horseback* (New York, Boston, and New Orleans, 1877), p. 82.
 6. Alex E. Sweet and J. Armory Knox, *On a Mexican Mustang Through Texas* (Hartford, 1883), p. 511.
 7. *The Passing of Black Eagle*, p. 424.
 8. *The Caballero's Way*, p. 200.
 9. *San Antonio Express*, March 2, 1880.
 10. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1884.
 11. The most adequate treatment of Hall's stay at the Dull ranch is found in Dora Neil Raymond, *Captain Lee Hall of Texas* (Norman, 1940), XV, 205.
 12. N. A. Jennings, *A Texas Ranger* (Dallas, 1930), VIII, 113.
 13. *An Afternoon Miracle*, p. 164.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
 15. *The Passing of Black Eagle*, p. 426.
 16. Bruce Roberts, *Springs From the Parched Ground* (Uvalde, 1950), p. 66.
 17. *The Last of the Troubadours*, p. 16.
 18. Dora Neil Raymond, *op. cit.*, XIV, 192.
 19. Bruce Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
 20. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.* XIV, 206.
 21. *San Antonio Express*, March 30, 1877.
 22. In the *Houston Post*, March 30, 1881, we read: "Ham White, convicted in U.S. court at Austin about four years ago for stage robbery and sentenced for life to U.S. pen at Moundsville, W.Va., arrived at his home near Bastrop, last Saturday, having been pardoned by the president. The petition for his pardon was signed by almost every man in the county."
 23. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, XIX, 264.
 24. Black Bart, the "Po. 8" as he called himself, landed in the state penitentiary at San Quentin, December 4, 1883. Black Bart, singlehanded, was said "to have committed more robberies than perhaps any other solitary individual in the annals of crime, for he robbed the stages of the Wells-Fargo Express on the Pacific coast twenty-eight times within a few years." *San Antonio Express*, December 10, 1883.

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25. "On the third of November the stage was robbed on the Sonora route, and nearly \$5000 obtained by *the lone highwayman*, who, being shot was compelled to hurry, and in the excitement of the chase dropped a handkerchief and cuff, which in the subsequent search were found by Sheriff Thorn. . . . They having Chinese laundry marks, led to his early arrest here. . . ." *Ibid.*
26. *The Hiding of Black Bill*, p. 684.
27. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, XIX, 264.
28. Dora Neil Raymond, *op. cit.*, II, 84.
29. Wm. W. Walton, *Life and Adventures of Ben Thompson, the Famous Texan* (Austin, 1884), p. 190.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
32. *San Antonio Express*, July 12, 1882.
33. Wm. W. Walton, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
35. *The Reformation of Calliope*, p. 254.
36. Wm. W. Walton, *op. cit.*, p. 194.
37. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, p. 264.
38. Charles A. Siringo, *Riata and Spurs* (Boston and New York, 1931), p. 138.
39. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
40. Texas newspapers of the 70's and 80's carried frequent notices of robberies by a band known as the Cisco Roughs.
41. *The Caballero's Way*, p. 199.
42. John Wesley Hardin, *The Life of John Wesley Hardin* (Seguin, Texas, 1896), p. 76.
43. *The Caballero's Way*, p. 199.
44. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, XIX, 271.
45. Sweet and Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
46. John Wesley Hardin, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
47. *The Caballero's Way*, p. 205.
48. John Wesley Hardin, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
49. C. Douglas, *Famous Texas Feuds* (Dallas, Texas, 1936), p. 80.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
51. N. A. Jennings, *op. cit.*, VIII, 125.
52. W. P. Webb, *The Texas Rangers* (Boston and New York, 1935), XII, 247.
53. Wm. W. Walton, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
54. *A Double Dyed Deceiver*, p. 412.
55. *Life and Adventures of Sam Bass* (Dallas, 1878), p. 10.
56. *The Passing of Black Eagle*, p. 426.
57. *An Afternoon Miracle*, p. 163.